

UNSUNG HEROES HELPING HEROES

To: Chairman Christopher Shays
Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats and International Relations

From: Marvin Bethea, 9/11 First Responder, Paramedic

Re: Congressional Testimony,

Date: February 28, 2006

Chairman Shays, distinguished members of Congress, thank you for giving me the opportunity today to testify at this hearing.

My name is Marvin Bethea. I am paramedic who became disabled because I responded to the September 11th attack on the World Trade Center. My employer was the Saint Vincent Catholic Medical Center-St John's Hospital of Queens. My partner James Dobson and I were dispatched by the New York Fire Department to respond just a few minutes after the first plane struck the North Tower.

My 23 years on the job couldn't prepare me for what happened that day. During my career I have had a gun put to my head a couple times and was shot at once, but nothing compared to being buried twice by debris from both towers. I am often asked, "What was it like being there when the towers fell?" Imagine going from day to night in no time -- you can't see an inch in front of you -- and then a big bucket of toxic dirt is dumped down your throat.

I was blowing small pieces of concrete out of my nose that day. Exactly five weeks later to the day of 9/11, I suffered a significant stroke. I recovered and went back to work, to only develop asthma, sinusitis, major depression and post traumatic stress disorder. I haven't worked since January 8, 2004, and I have to take numerous medications.

Why are we here? We have a major health emergency on our hands today and it is getting worse. Here we have men and woman who had very physical jobs -- police officers, paramedics, construction workers, firefighters and others. Many of these people were required to take a pre-employment physical and a yearly physical after that, as part of the job. So why is it that these people are now sick in numbers that are mind boggling? If you look at their work histories, you will find the common denominator is exposure to 9/11 pollution. Remember, we were told by governmental officials that the air was safe, which we know now was not true. Many of us are very sick now, and some of us have died.

I would like to honor the memory of Tim Keller, 41-year-old EMT and father of four; iron worker Michael Kendrick, 53-year-old father of five children, who died two weeks ago; NYPD Detective James Zadroga, age 34, and the list goes on. We have been

given a slow death sentence, and we must ask ourselves who is next. I fear that the total number of those killed from 9/11 will rise significantly.

What has the government done, or I should say, what has the government failed to do? Consider the 9/11 Victims Compensation Fund. The idea of that fund was the right thing to do, but the parameters to qualify for the fund were much too narrow and unrealistic. Rescue and recovery workers who arrived more than four days -- 96 hours -- after the attack did not qualify for the Fund, even though the fires burned at Ground Zero for over three months. Where is the logic in that? And if a heart condition, cancer or some other health impact was not diagnosed by the filing deadline of December 22, 2003, it wasn't covered. Also, the outreach to responders was not effective. Many people thought the Fund was just for the bereaved families. The 9/11 Fund must be opened up again, and it must have fair qualifications so that the people who really need help are able to get it.

Then there is the issue of the 125 million dollars that was taken away from us by Congress. I guess some members thought that if the State didn't spend it, the rescue and recovery workers didn't need it. These members did not know the truth. The worker compensation system in New York treats applicants so badly -- they humiliate workers so much -- that some heroes who were already on edge could not handle the mental torment that the system put them through. Even more common is the problem of unfair denials and delays. I am pleased to say that with the bi-partisan efforts of Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney, Congressman Vito Fossella, Senator Hillary Clinton, Congressman Jerry Nadler, Congressman Steve Israel, just to name a few of our elected officials, we will be getting the 175 million dollars back. But I strongly urge Congress to hold a hearing on why worker compensation claims from 9/11 are rejected at a rate that is several times higher than non-9/11 claims.

To the best of my knowledge, the government hasn't spent a nickel yet on treatment for people made ill by 9/11. Money was given for screening and monitoring, but not treatment. How do you explain that? I'm told that much of the 125 million dollars restored by Congress will be used for treatment, but I can tell you that this will only meet a fraction of the real need. I was one of the lucky ones who was able to get treatment from the Mt. Sinai Health For Heroes Program paid for by private donations and the American Red Cross. But Mt Sinai already has a three month waiting list for treatment. I can honestly say if it wasn't for my psychiatrist, Dr. Laurie Malkoff, I probably wouldn't be able to testify before you today. It's great to tell me that I have asthma, post-traumatic stress disorder, or acid reflux, but will you make sure that I get the treatment I need to cope with my illness or injury better? Congress must meet the real need.

Congresswoman Maloney and Congressman Fossella are right on point to call for the establishment of a federal Health Czar. But this will only be successful if the person chosen is not some political appointee, but instead has a strong track record on worker health and safety. Also, the Health Czar needs an advisory committee made up of the heroes and community members affected by 9/11, and should follow their recommendations. It is said that you can't judge a man until you walk in his shoes; we are walking in his shoes. I know our organization, Unsung Heroes Helping Heroes, would be honored to

serve on this advisory committee. Finally, it will only be successful if the changes that the Health Czar recommends are implemented.

Most important, our government must not use the excuse of looking for a Health Czar as a reason to delay action in this health emergency. It should reopen and expand the September 11 Victim Compensation Fund immediately. People need help today, not a year or more later while this office is getting set up. We need the Czar to identify ways to reach all of the people with unmet needs. We don't need the Czar to delay action on the obvious, urgent needs that are already staring us in the face.

9/11 is the most significant event that has happened in this country. I remember people asking, "Where were you when President Kennedy was shot?" My response is, "It was my 4th birthday and I remember it like it was yesterday." Now people say, "Where were you when 9/11 happened?" I also remember President Kennedy saying "My fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country." I was so impressed, when 9/11 happened, by the way that thousands of ordinary people in the tri-state area pulled together and responded to New York City. They didn't wait to be called. Construction, law enforcement, EMS, transport, fire departments all responded. We served our country. What would President Kennedy say today about how the 9/11 heroes are being treated?

I would like to know, where are all of our elected officials from across the country that came down to Ground Zero and promised they would never forget us? What has changed? Did you forget what you said? Do I need to pull up your 9/11 sound bite to remind you of your statements? We are sick now. Some of us are very sick. I was taking two medicines before 9/11, and now I'm on 15 different medicines. We have been victims of 9/11 once. Don't make us victims twice.

And what about the future? We need to expedite passing a federal law that in any future man-made disaster like 9/11 or natural disaster like Katrina, rescue and recovery workers would have federal health coverage if they become ill or injured, as well as some type of fair financial compensation. We must remember that when people can't work they usually lose their health coverage. The system says, "Go and get COBRA." Well, COBRA costs a lot of money. People who can't work usually don't have a lot of money.

We are a great nation, and we must do better than we are doing. It doesn't matter if you are a Republican, Democrat, independent, black, Asian, white, Jewish, Muslim or Catholic. You see when you cut me, I bleed red just like you do. We truly have more in common than differences. We would all know that, if we would only sit and talk to one another. The unity we had in this country right after 9/11 is something I will never forget, and I pray that we get that unity back again.

President Bush, I appeal to you to show us some passion and kindness, like the care that I showed one of your family members when I had that individual as a patient in my ambulance. In closing I would like to say, God bless each and every one of you and God bless the United States of America. Thank you.